

Walt Whitman

(1819 -1882)

The Birth of American Poetry

THE UNITED STATES declared its political independence from England in 1776, but its literary independence from England did not occur until 1855, when an **obscure** American journalist published a poem called "There Was a Child Went Forth." The poem was written in free verse, with lines stretching expansively across the page like America stretching from ocean to ocean. Its most striking feature, like the young country, was youthful **exuberance**.

The person who wrote this poem — Walt Whitman — was born in 1819 on Long Island, New York, "within a stone's throw of the sea," the second of eight children. His father was a farmer-carpenter who little understood his dreamy son. One of Walt's brothers was a **congenital** idiot, another died in **an insane asylum**, another died of alcoholism, and a sister suffered from chronic depression. Yet from these surroundings emerged a figure who would **exult** in "the rush of the streets," in the play of sunlight on grass and trees, in physical health, in the very act of being alive.

How did this happen?

The transformation of young Walter — a child excessively dependent on his mother — into the poet Walt Whitman didn't happen overnight. It was a slow, painstaking, sometimes joyful, sometimes melancholy process that probably began with Whitman's **apprenticeship**, at the age of twelve, to a typesetter in Brooklyn. When his apprenticeship was completed four years later, he took a job as a country schoolteacher on Long Island. This did, afford a study of human nature that he later acknowledged as an important poetic source.

In 1841, Whitman moved into New York City and, as a freelance reporter for several small newspapers, was absorbed into what he called the "fascinating chaos" of street life, of theater and opera, of restaurants and saloons, of democratic politics.

The turning point of Whitman's literary development came in 1842, when he heard Ralph Waldo Emerson, the most **eminent** man of letters in America, lecture on the need for really American literature — a literature that was not dependent on European culture for its inspiration. In that lecture, Emerson defined the characteristics of the ideal American poet: "He visits without fear the factory, the railroad, and the wharf. When he lifts his great voice, men gather to him and forget all that is past, and then his words are to the hearers, pictures of all history; and immediately the tools of their bench, and the riches of their useful arts, and the laws they live under, seem to them weapons of romance. ..." Sitting in the audience, Whitman

felt that Emerson was speaking directly to him. But how was he to **forge** the new American verse? How was he to give form to such a vast, unformed, and divergent landscape? It took Whitman thirteen more years to provide answers to these questions.

Whitman was greatly impressed by the revolutionary events of 1848 in Europe and took part in the political activities in his country. Whitman protested against all sorts of oppression and especially he exposed inhumanity of slavery. In that period his first poem “Europe” appeared. It was written in a new style – the “free verse” for which he became famous. It was included into the collection of poems called “Leaves of Grass”. He continued to add new poems to the collection to rearrange them until his death.

However the book brought him neither money nor fame. It was only later on that it was recognized as one of the masterpieces of World Literature. Most of the poems in “Leaves of Grass” are about Man and Nature. A small number of his poems deal with New York – the city that fascinated Whitman. Whitman had faith in the goodness of the human nature, in the power of Man, in his ability to create a better world.

I. **Explain the words in bold.**

Occur

obscure
exuberance.
congenital
an insane asylum,
apprenticeship
eminent
to forge

II. Scanning for facts. Find the following information and put it in the correct order.

The process of transformation of young Walter into the poet Walt Whitman
The family background of young Walter.
The role of Ralf Emerson in Whitman's life.
The main ideas of the poems in the collection "The Leaves of Grass".
The literary style Whitman is famous for.

III. Read the text and mark the sentences True\False

1. In 1855 Walt Whitman was a well-known American journalist.
2. The first Whitman's poem impressed his readers with its
3. In his childhood Walter lived far away from the sea.
4. Whitman owned his family for the positive attitudes and love for life.
5. Emerson was sure that a poet brings 'light' into the life of common people
6. It didn't take Whitman long to become a poet.